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## Honor and Shame in the Sagas of the Icelanders: Women's Struggle for Influence

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HONOR AND SHAME IN THE SAGAS OF THE ICELANDERS: WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR  
INFLUENCE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the History

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## Honor and Shame in the Sagas of the Icelanders: Women's Struggle for Influence

The sagas of the Icelanders, or *Íslendingasögur*, are some of the most impressive bodies of literature to emerge from medieval Europe, if not from Europe as a whole. These narratives tell the story of the people of Iceland during the first 160 years of settlement, beginning in AD 874.<sup>1</sup> They focus on the tales of men, describing their struggles and glory. However, more than occasionally, women played an important role in these sagas. In Saga Age Iceland, women held little power in comparison to men. They had little say over their marriages and could not participate in the legal system, which resulted in women having to rely on men for their status, property, and safety.<sup>2</sup> Despite these restrictions, women were not powerless. In the sagas of the Icelanders, there are many instances where women used the strict honor code to goad men into acting in a way which was beneficial to them. Little, if anything, was more important to men of the time than maintaining their honor and masculinity.<sup>3</sup> By insulting the masculinity and honor of the men around them, women incited men into action. Men would then perform acts that women themselves were not allowed to perform. By exploiting men's concern with their honor and masculinity, women indirectly influenced events, giving them power over issues

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<sup>1</sup> *Landnámabók: The Book of Settlements*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), 20.

<sup>2</sup> William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Age Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 212.

<sup>3</sup> Vilhjálmur Árnason, "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 90, no. 2 (Apr. 1991): 172.

normally outside of their control and enabling them to participate in a decision-making process typically allowed only to men.

It is impossible to use the sagas of the Icelanders as a source without first addressing the controversy surrounding them. Historians have fervently debated whether the sagas can be used as historical sources. For the argument being made here, the sagas have a lot to offer in regards to social information. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sagas fell out of historical research, with some historians dismissing them as nothing but fictional stories with no historical value. This group of scholars, known as the “Icelandic school,” reached its peak momentum in the 1960s, arguing that history based on oral tradition posed too many hazards to be studied and that history should not be concerned with the private lives of people, which is the focus of the sagas.<sup>4</sup> These scholars cited small inaccuracies as reason to discredit the entire body of work. Other historians continued to argue for their historicity. For example, historian Finnur Jónsson wrote, “I will uphold and defend the historical reliability of the sagas... until I am forced to lay down my pen.”<sup>5</sup> These historians believed that while some inaccuracies existed, the works were, overall, historical and had much historical information to offer. Finally, there are historians who do not feel comfortable saying whether the works are historical or not, so they choose to neglect the sagas entirely.

Neglecting the sagas as historical sources was, and is, both unwise and unhelpful. While scholars may never know just how accurate the sagas are, the sagas give the best look into the

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<sup>4</sup> Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 38-40.

<sup>5</sup> Jesse Byock, “History and the Sagas: the Effects of Nationalism,” in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (London: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 54.

world of medieval Iceland. Writing them off as purely fiction is to neglect the trove of social information that they offer and does no favors to improving the understanding of medieval Iceland. Historians have written very little about the social history of medieval Iceland because of this fear of using the sagas. Fortunately, this attitude is beginning to change. The increased interest in social history has allowed the sagas to regain a footing in the world of historical research. Some current historians, such as Jesse Byock and William Ian Miller, are advocating for their use once more in historical research from a social perspective.

Knowledge about medieval Iceland is limited due to the lack sources, as there are few historical documents from this period. Scholar William Ian Miller wrote, "If early Icelandic social and cultural history is to be written, literary sources will have to be used."<sup>6</sup> The debate over whether historians can use the sagas for social history is misguided. This idea is not a new one in medieval history and the use of the sagas to better understand social and cultural history should not be any different. For example, historians use *Beowulf* to gain a better understanding about Anglo-Saxon social history, even though *Beowulf* contains fantastical elements. This is not the only case of historians using stories as historical sources. This is a common practice in the study of areas such as Frankish or biblical history.<sup>7</sup> Saints' lives are examples of medieval literature that can appear fictional on the surface but offer much social context. While the authors of these narratives depict saints through exaggerated events, they also reveal the traditions and ideals of the time period in which they were writing.<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the sagas.

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<sup>6</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biographies: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 88

The sagas exaggerate certain details, much like the saints' lives, but also offer invaluable social information. Because sources are limited, the sagas cannot be disregarded.

While the authors of the sagas took liberties with the tales, the stories still revolve around real people and real events. They focus on mundane issues that Icelandic farmers dealt with, such as disputes over land, beached whales, insults, and status.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, medieval Icelanders expected the sagas to be realistic and accurate. The characters in the sagas had to behave in ways that were expected and events had to unfold in ways that appeared normal to the people of Iceland. The inventing of certain events or characters of the story does not create issues in regard to studying social history. The characters of the sagas are still bound by "the ranges of the possible in the culture."<sup>10</sup> For this reason, even if specific scenes did not occur, the behaviors of the characters would not have deviated far from the norm of the time without the saga authors calling attention to the instance. This is shown in the *Laxdæla Saga*. Aud, a minor character, wore men's breeches, which was socially unacceptable. The saga notes that she was strange by the standards of the time, and her husband divorced her because she wore breeches.<sup>11</sup> The saga authors indicated which behaviors deviated from the norm, which gives the reader a sense of how medieval Icelanders expected their fellow countrymen to behave.

An important part of the Icelandic narrative tradition was to tell the stories of the ancestors of Icelanders. Genealogy and feuding played a large part in everyday life, creating a need for Icelanders to understand their connection to kin and the history of the feud that their family was involved in. As a result, Icelanders wanted to hear what their ancestors actually did.

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<sup>9</sup> Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (London: Penguin Group, 1969), 126.

Even if authors took liberties with the specifics of the stories, listeners expected the story to be historical and, as mentioned earlier, for characters to behave realistically. With regard to this paper, had women not actually incited men into action and used the honor code to their advantage, this device would not have been as common of an occurrence as it was. Women incited men throughout the sagas of the Icelanders, with over fifty cases of female inciters.<sup>12</sup> The commonality of this act shows that women acting as inciters did happen and may have been a regular event.

So this prompts the question: Why did women incite? This is a complicated question that must be answered by explaining the situation of women and the situation of Iceland during this period. Iceland was colonized shortly after AD 870 by the Norse (people primarily from what is now modern-day Norway). Migration occurred for a multitude of reasons, though no reasons can be truly proven and likely multiple reasons drove people to migrate. Around the time of the first settlement, Harald Fairhair united Norway and became the first king of Norway. Local chieftains, who felt threatened by Harald and saw no benefit from the establishment of a monarchy, fled to Iceland to remain independent.<sup>13</sup> Wealthy farmers, who wanted better land and had the means to migrate, also moved. One theory suggests that Norway's population was rapidly expanding and there was not enough farmland to support everyone, hence the migration to an uninhabited island. In general, the migrations to Iceland were independent, with no sole reason for the moving of people. Once there, these men, along with their families, claimed large tracts of land. This sixty year period is known as *Landnám*.<sup>14</sup> In total, according to

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<sup>12</sup> Jenny Jochens, "The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?" *Viator* 17 (1986): 39.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Ferguson, *The Vikings: A History* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 158.

<sup>14</sup> *Landnám* can be translated to "land-taking."

*Landnámabók*, around 430 magnates settled the area. When there was no land left to claim, these men began parceling land out to kinsmen and supporters, setting the stage for the tales of clan feud that the sagas of the Icelanders focused so heavily on.<sup>15</sup>

Environmentally, Iceland lacks arable farmland due to the extreme terrain. The island is covered in active volcanos and massive glaciers. Much like Norway, all farming had to be done along the coast due to the rugged terrain inland. The geography was not a deterrent, as it was similar to what the Norse endured in Norway, and while Iceland was not necessarily warmer than Norway, it did have a stable and mild climate that was persistent across the entire country.<sup>16</sup> In between mountains, and glaciers existed fertile valleys that allowed for farming and the grazing of sheep. While the terrain was difficult to cross due to its ruggedness and natural boundaries, Iceland provided settlers with a sense of security. Because the island was small and habitable land was scarce, settlers were able to quickly make sure that there were no natives or other settlers present.<sup>17</sup>

Iceland was by no means a suitable place for farming, and clashes often broke out over the scarce farmland. Since Iceland itself was not fully established at this time, there was no system to settle these disputes at first. Settlers arrived in Iceland with fairly equal social status. They were freemen, with no claims to kingdoms or princely titles. While this egalitarian system was appealing to settlers, problems arose due to a lack of governance. Once the original settlers had claimed all of the available land, they had to set up rules to regulate resources and land, as

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<sup>15</sup> Birgitta Wallace, "The Norse in Newfoundland: L'Anse aux Meadows and Vinland," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 19, no. 1 (2013): 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ferguson, *The Vikings*, 161.

<sup>17</sup> Orri Vésteinsson, "The Archaeology of *Landnám*: Early Settlement in Iceland," in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 167.



well as deal with crime.<sup>18</sup> Originally, Iceland followed a system that resembled others of earlier Germanic origin. There was an institution of chiefs and an institution of the *thing*, a governing assembly of free men.<sup>19</sup> The people established local *things* throughout the country. By AD 930, the people of Iceland had instituted the Althing (*Alþingi*), a national assembly established to solve the legislative and judicial issues of the island. The Althing consisted of thirty-six *goðar*<sup>20</sup> (later thirty-nine), along with their supporters, the *þingmenn*. In addition, a lawspeaker (*lögsöumaðar*) was present. The lawspeaker's job was to recite one-third of the law code at the Althing from memory; after three years, the lawspeaker would have recited the entire law code. While the lawspeaker could provide legal information surrounding an issue brought before the Althing, he was not obliged to give advice.<sup>21</sup> While Icelandic law only required that the *goðar*, the *þingmenn*, and the lawspeaker appear at the Althing, many others showed up, as the Althing was a time for gaiety and socializing as well.

The colonizers of Iceland intended for the Althing to solve grievances brought forward and prevent blood feuding, but this did not always happen. The Althing, while an impressive proto-democratic idea for the time period, could not stop the feuding that played an important role in Iceland. Overall, the Althing had little control over the actions of men, since there was no true official institution to ensure that people abided by the laws. While the Althing could outlaw men and even issue the death penalty, it could not enforce these rulings, making it a quasi-legal

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<sup>18</sup> Helgi Thorláksson, "The Icelandic Commonwealth Period: Building a New Society," in *Vikings* (see note 17), 178.

<sup>19</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 118.

<sup>20</sup> A *goði* (pl. *goðar*) was similar to a chief in that he had governmental control. His office was called a *goðorð*. The *goðarð* was a political center that was not bounded by land. *Þingmenn* (those loyal to the *goðar*) were free to create contracts with *goðar* without dependence on their location.

<sup>21</sup> Maciej Koszowski, "Medieval Iceland: The Influence of Culture and Tradition on Law," *Scandinavian Studies* 86, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 336.

institution with no real binding.<sup>22</sup> The plaintiff himself had to carry out the rulings and punishment. More importantly, the Althing did not stop men from feuding.

Feuding was a critical part of medieval Icelandic society and heavily influenced social conduct. Feuds often escalated into violence and could last for generations, necessitating familiarity with genealogy. Laws recognized kinship in both paternal and maternal lines for up to five generations, which affected who could inherit and who could seek vengeance.<sup>23</sup> Feuding was complicated and sometimes even the slightest insult could throw families into a feud. During a feud, men would purposefully attack the opposing family. This was done through insults, seizure of land, slaughter of cattle, and even murder of the opposing members. Feud is not to be equated with lawlessness, as there were rules to how feuds could play out. Actions had to be justified and equal to a certain extent. The killing of ten in retaliation for the death of one was no longer feud but war or anarchy.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this can best be explained by the Law of Talion, or better known as “an eye for an eye.” The actions of feuding had to be somewhat equivalent to each other. There were also rules on who could be a victim. Most blood feuds tended to avoid women, children, and the elderly. The killing of a member from one of these groups often intensified the feud drastically.<sup>25</sup> Most commonly, these feuds could be traced back to an instance of one person dishonoring another.

Old Norse society was an honor culture, with honor and dishonor heavily impacting social structure. Political philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre best summed up Old Norse society

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<sup>22</sup> Thorláksson, “The Icelandic Commonwealth Period,” 182.

<sup>23</sup> Úlfar Bragason, “The Politics of Genealogies in *Sturlunga saga*,” in *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350: Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence*, ed. Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holman (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2004), 312.

<sup>24</sup> William Ian Miller, “Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England,” *Law and History Review* 1, no. 2 (1983): 160.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

with this statement: "Honour is conferred by one's peers and without honour a man is without worth."<sup>26</sup> While there was no written code of honor, the sagas reveal that this socially-enforced code was prominent in the lives of the people and that the perception of masculinity was a major element of the code. Icelanders had a word to describe this socially enforced honor code, as well as for men and women who were good representations of this code: *drengskapur*.

*Drengskapur* was a trait that was ascribed to someone who embodied manliness and had moral substance and, as a result, could be trusted and relied on. It is similar to the word *máttargæði*, which can best be described as "goodness-based-on-strength."<sup>27</sup> The idea of manhood being an achievement rather than a natural stage of growth was important to the honor code of Iceland. Men had to earn their masculinity in the eyes of their fellow Icelanders. There was no definition of manhood exactly; instead, there were traits that were associated with manliness and traits that were not. Gender in Norse society is tricky, as the sources are not entirely clear. Since the authors wrote for a contemporaneous audience, they felt no need to explain the Norse concepts of gender. This can create problems for scholars, as Norse views on gender differ from modern Western views. This can be seen with the words *blauðr* and *hvatr*. When applied to a woman, the word *blauðr* seems to mean 'female,' a reference to her sex. Yet, when applied to a man, *blauðr* appears to mean 'cowardly,' taking on a more gender-related meaning. The same goes for *hvatr*; when applied to females, the word indicates strength.<sup>28</sup> This poses a problem when defining gender and sex, since in the Norse mind they were most likely one and the same.

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<sup>26</sup> Árnason, "Morality and Social Structure," 171.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>28</sup> Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (April 1993): 371.

The *blauður/hvatr* dichotomy appears to be more of a gender continuum rather than a binary system, as men and women could slide between the two concepts.<sup>29</sup> Because of this men had to acquire and maintain masculinity and manhood, which they did through actions such as labor, defending their honor, and the general embodying of *drengskapur*.

As these words suggest, Icelanders determined honor based on the integrity and masculinity of a man, with the latter overshadowing the former. This was not without reason. If Icelanders deemed a man to be dishonorable, he was then considered to be unreliable and not worth allying with. There was no official institution at the time to ensure that Icelanders followed laws, so one was entirely dependent on their alliances for protection. Without honor and a good social standing, a man was unable to form alliances of any sorts, leaving him and his property vulnerable to anyone who wished to attack. If such a man was attacked, there would be no one to come to his aid and no one to help him avenge the deed. A man without honor was ostracized from the rest of the community as no one would want to associate with him.<sup>30</sup> To be without honor was humiliating. Very little, if anything, was more important to Icelandic men than maintaining their honor, and no trait was more valuable than being honorable.

The honor system held such influence that men would knowingly make reckless choices in order to maintain their honor. This can be seen throughout the sagas, with one instance being in the Saga of Thord Menace. When Thord told his friend Thorhall to leave when an attack was eminent, Thorhall responded, “but my enemies will say that I was a coward to leave you.” Thord then turned to Eyvind and told him to leave as well. Eyvind refused, saying, “That

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<sup>29</sup> Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 377.

<sup>30</sup> Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist, “Rape in the Icelandic Sagas: An Insight in the Perceptions about Sexual Assaults on Women in the Old Norse World,” *Journal of Family History* 40, no. 4 (2015): 438.

disgrace will never befall me.”<sup>31</sup> Neither Thorhall nor Eyvind appeared to have any concern for their safety with their honor on the line. If they were concerned, their concern for their honor overshadowed it.

Because of the crucial role that the honor code played in everyday life, men felt obligated to avenge themselves and their families if they had been wronged. One of the most common wrongs was being insulted; insults warranted immediate vengeance and certain insults could be avenged with death.<sup>32</sup> If men failed to act and avenge a wrong, such as an insult, they immediately lost their honor in the eyes’ of other Icelanders. Even though avenging themselves could lead to their own demise, the consequences of inaction were so severe that men felt that there was no other choice than to act against those who had wronged them, as the alternative was social ostracism and humiliation.<sup>33</sup> Women, on the other hand, did not have the ability to exact revenge in the direct manner that men had. In fact, they legally had few abilities overall and had little say over their lives. Because of this inability to act on behalf of oneself, women instead relied on the manipulation of this honor system in order to get what they wanted. This is shown in multiple instances in numerous sagas. This use of honor and revenge was more than just a plot device in the sagas; the honor code presented a way for women to influence the events around them in a world where they had little say in their own lives. In the sagas, when women acted as inciters, they often had some stake in the matter,

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<sup>31</sup> “The Saga of Thord Menace,” in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 383.

<sup>32</sup> Different insults had different consequences. *Ragr* was one of the worst insults and a man had the right to kill the man who had insulted him. *Ragr* has three identified meanings when applied to a man: “perversity in sexual matters” (penetrated by another male), “versed in witchcraft,” or “cowardly, unmanly, effeminate.” Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 375.

<sup>33</sup> Ljungqvist, “Rape in the Icelandic Sagas,” 438

whether it was economic, familial, or personal. By shaming men and convincing them that they would lose their honor if they did not act, women controlled certain events in their lives that would have been typically outside of their control.

Like other medieval European cultures, Iceland was patriarchal. Only men could participate in the Althing. Men initiated marriage contracts and inherited land. Women, while not completely without rights, lacked the ability to control major aspects of their lives, such as marriage, wealth, and even happiness. Women tended to the home, raising children, weaving cloth, and taking care of other household tasks.<sup>34</sup> Outside of this setting, she had no say, unless she used the honor code to her advantage.

There are three different circumstances in which a woman felt that she needed to use the Icelandic honor code in order to improve or influence her situation: when she felt humiliated or wronged, when she wanted to further her own interests, or when she wanted to avenge the death of a kinsmen. Not every instance will be described here as there are many. Instead, this paper will now look at major examples in each category and discuss them. The historicity of each individual utilization of the honor code is debatable, but the phenomenon itself recurs in the sagas and points to a larger shaming ritual that appears prevalent in medieval Iceland. Given the context and the limitations imposed upon women during this time, these acts of shaming are not only reasonable but logical as they allowed women to influence events normally outside of their control.

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<sup>34</sup> Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 365.

### Personally Wronged by Situation

Often throughout the sagas, women were put into situations where they suffered at the hands of others. This could be physical suffering, such as violence inflicted by a husband, or emotional suffering, such as feeling humiliated or being in an unhappy marriage. In both cases, because of the way the legal system operated, women could feel trapped with few options. As a result, women often used the honor code to redress their suffering.

Marriage was often a source of suffering for women, and perhaps in no other situation in the saga, aside from grieving the dead, did women suffer more. With regard to marriage, the sources are foggy. Some sagas show the father consulting his daughter prior to making a marriage agreement for her, while other fathers simply settled a marriage contract without any involvement of the daughter. Possibly, the idea of consent may have been a Christian value written into the sagas to reinforce certain behaviors in a nation undergoing a rapid morality change due to the introduction of Christianity around AD 1000.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, Iceland gave women more rights in comparison to other medieval European cultures with regard to gender, such as property-ownership and divorce, so there is a possibility that women had some sort of say in their marriage arrangements. Regardless if men consulted their daughters about their marriage prospects, the men had the authority to decide, not the daughters. That does not mean that daughters did not make their unhappiness known when they were not consulted. When Guðrún was not asked about her marriage to Thorvald, the saga said she

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<sup>35</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, "Marriage and the Creation of Kin in the Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 75, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 477.

“showed the strongest displeasure.”<sup>36</sup> The use of the honor code by women arose in situations where consultation did not take place.

When fathers arranged marriages without their daughters’ input, the sagas often describe these marriages as unhappy. Fortunately for women, these marriages did not last long for two reasons: widowhood and divorce. Widowhood was common during the period because of the violent nature of Saga Age Iceland. Widows received much more freedom than unmarried women. They could remarry without interference from kinsmen and could control their land.<sup>37</sup> When Bolli asked Guðrún’s father Osvif for his daughter’s hand, Osvif replied, “Guðrún is a widow and she therefore has the right to give her own answer.”<sup>38</sup> Because she had lost her previous husband, Guðrún gained the ability to choose her next husband. This instance from the *Laxdæla Saga* shows the increase in independence women gained from becoming a widow.

Divorce was also an option, and the sagas show that women were four times more likely to initiate a divorce than men. This was due to divorce being relatively easy to obtain. Women could divorce for quite a few reasons, such as violence, unhappiness, failure to consummate marriage, or even for her husband wearing effeminate clothing.<sup>39</sup> To divorce, a woman would call upon a group of witnesses and then publicly declare herself divorced three times, first beside her husband’s bed, second at the threshold of their home, and finally at their local thing. Since women were not allowed to speak at assemblies, usually someone else had to declare her

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<sup>36</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 124.

<sup>37</sup> Jochens, “The Medieval Icelandic Heroine,” 38.

<sup>38</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 154-155.

<sup>39</sup> Jochens, “The Medieval Icelandic Heroine,” 39.



divorced. This can be seen in *Njál's Saga* where Unnr's father Mord was the one to give public notice of her divorce at the Assembly.<sup>40</sup>

Divorce, or threatening to divorce, was one of the easiest ways women could avenge a wrong done to them or goad their husband into acting. Unlike other continental European cultures, when a Nordic woman married, she still maintained connections to her family, as well as formed connections with her husband's family. This can be said for the husband as well; by marrying, he gained not only a wife but the support of his wife's family. Based on this, divorce was not in a man's best interest.

Yet, divorce was common. Slapping was one of the most common reasons cited for divorce. Being slapped was considered to be humiliating, particularly if the slap occurred in front of witnesses. Both the Icelandic and Norwegian law codes discussed how divorce could be obtained, although the law codes disagreed on whether slapping justified divorce.

*Gulatingsslova*, the law code of contemporary Norway, imposed fines on a husband if he struck his wife in front of witnesses and allowed for divorce upon the third occurrence.<sup>41</sup> While slapping was not a sanctioned reason for divorce in *Grágás*, the Icelandic law code, the sagas show that slapping was enough to justify divorce. Icelanders seemed to have treated *Grágás* more as a collection of rules and norms than actual laws, and it is difficult to tell which laws were recognized and which were suggestions that were ignored.<sup>42</sup> Based on the sagas, divorce appears to be one such issue where Icelanders ignored *Grágás*.

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<sup>40</sup> *Njál's Saga*, translated by Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander (New York: New York University Press, 1955), 33.

<sup>41</sup> Laurence M. Larson, *The Earliest Norwegian Laws, Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 76.

<sup>42</sup> Thorláksson, "The Icelandic Commonwealth Period," 181.

Divorce was not always enough for women who felt they had been wronged, and a woman could use the honor code to humiliate a man who had humiliated her. In *Laxdæla saga*, when Thorvald slapped Guðrún for demanding too much expensive jewelry, she decided to get revenge rather than immediately divorce him, as she felt insulted by the action. She chose to make Thorvald a shirt with a wide-necking opening, an article of clothing deemed effeminate by medieval Iceland. Not much else is said about the matter other than Guðrún divorced Thorvald that same spring.<sup>43</sup> Slapping was enough justification to grant divorce, but because Guðrún felt insulted by the slap, she chose to seek revenge rather than simply divorce. By creating a womanly shirt, she inflicted damage to Thorvald's masculinity. Instead of divorcing him because of the violence he inflicted, she embarrassed him. Then, because of the embarrassment she caused she divorced him. Through humiliating her husband and harming his masculinity and honor, Guðrún avenged the humiliation she suffered, as well as removed herself from an unhappy situation. Guðrún then received half of the estate, kept her dowry, and remarried.

The sagas present another instance of marital abuse, though this instance had a much darker ending. Hallgerd experienced the deaths of not one but two of her husbands because they had slapped her. Hallgerd was described as beautiful but headstrong, with a harsh disposition.<sup>44</sup> Despite being warned that the marriage would be difficult, Thorvald sued for Hallgerd's hand, and Hallgerd's father Hoskuld agreed to the match. When discovering the marriage arrangement, Hallgerd was upset, not only because Hoskuld did not discuss the arrangement with her but also because she felt Thorvald was an inferior match.<sup>45</sup> As a result,

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<sup>43</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 125.

<sup>44</sup> *Njáls Saga*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

the marriage was an unhappy one. The problems escalated when Hallgerd used up the food supplies meant to last until summer. During an argument about Hallgerd's wastefulness, Hallgerd made a snide remark about Thorvald's upbringing. Thorvald became angry and struck her across the face.<sup>46</sup>

Because of Thorvald's violence towards her, Hallgerd felt the need to avenge herself, which she did by transferring the humiliation of the slap to her foster-father. After Thorvald struck her, Hallgerd went outside, where she was approached by her foster-father Thjóóstólf.<sup>47</sup> When he asked why she was bleeding, Hallgerd replied, "It is my husband Thorvald who has done it, and you were not around at the time, though you would have been, if you cared for me at all."<sup>48</sup> While she only spoke one line, Hallgerd challenged Thjóóstólf's role as her paternal figure, suggesting that had he been watching over her, he would have prevented such abuse from happening. Hallgerd was humiliated by the slap but transferred this humiliation to Thjóóstólf, giving him the responsibility of avenging her honor. Thjóóstólf, an aggressive man to begin with, had no qualms with accepting this challenge. He responded, "I didn't know anything about it, but avenge it I will."<sup>49</sup> True to his word, Thjóóstólf killed Thorvald.

Because of this instance, when Hallgerd again had marital issues, Thjóóstólf automatically resumed his position as the guardian of Hallgerd's honor, as well as his own honor. Hallgerd

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<sup>46</sup> *Njáls Saga*, 38.

<sup>47</sup> Fostering was a common practice in Norse culture. Children were often given to families of lower status to be raised. In other cases, related kin would raise children, strengthening the alliance between families. There are some suggestions that fostering occurred to distribute children among households, since it was common for certain families to be childless due to high infant mortality rate. For more information see William Ian Miller, "Some Aspects of Householding in the Medieval Icelandic Commonwealth," *Continuity and Change* 3 (1988): 321-355.

<sup>48</sup> *Njáls Saga*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

later remarried Glúm, about whom her father wisely consulted her about first, and the marriage was a fairly happy one. Glúm allowed Thjóóstólf to stay with them, despite knowing Thjóóstólf's reputation and the fate of Thorvald. Eventually, though, Thjóóstólf proved to be too much trouble, and Glúm decided to no longer let him stay. Hallgerd protested, and Glúm slapped her, which caused her to cry. Thjóóstólf saw this and said, "You have been badly treated, but this shall not happen again!" Hallgerd, who loved Glúm still, said, "You are not to avenge this, nor are you to interfere in anything which concerns Glúm and myself."<sup>50</sup> Thjóóstólf chose to ignore her and killed Glúm. The assumption here is that despite the protests of Hallgerd, the situation for Thjóóstólf was the same. He, as the foster-father of Hallgerd, felt the need to protect the honor of Hallgerd and, therefore, his own. This is done selfishly, however, as Hallgerd told Thjóóstólf not to attack Glúm. Thjóóstólf's concern for his honor was more important than following Hallgerd's wishes and, as a result, Thjóóstólf killed Glúm. Thjóóstólf maintained his honor but hurt his foster-daughter in the process.

Hallgerd's situation, while extreme, does highlight not only the differences between men and women, but also the disparities between women. Only a woman with legal connections could divorce and maintain her property and status. Hallgerd's situation is contrasted with Unnr's, which is presented only pages apart. Unnr divorced her husband, who then refused to return her dowry. Unnr approached Gunnar, a kinsman of hers, who then asked his friend Njál for help with the case, as Njál was known for his judicial wisdom.<sup>51</sup> Unnr won the case against her former husband and received silver as compensation.<sup>52</sup> Hallgerd, on the other

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<sup>50</sup> *Njál's Saga*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-58.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

hand, did not appear to have had these advantages. Despite her unhappiness in her marriage, she seemed to have been unable to divorce her husband. Perhaps, this was because she had no one who was willing to publicly divorce her at the Althing. Instead, she shamed her foster-father, who then acted on her behalf.

The honor code was not always used to end a marriage; sometimes, a woman employed this tactic in order to remedy a marital problem that had a negative effect on her in particular. The following example is from *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, or the Saga of Gísli Súrsson.<sup>53</sup> One day, all of the men left the house to go haymaking, except for Þorkell, who refused to work on the farm. While taking a nice nap by the fire, Þorkell awoke to the voices of his wife Ásgerður and his sister-in-law coming from the women's area of the room. Þorkell decided to eavesdrop on the two women as they did their sewing. Ásgerður admitted that she was in love with another man, which angered Þorkell. After making an exclamation of betrayal he left the room. Later that night, Þorkell refused to let Ásgerður into their bed, telling her a long time would pass before he would allow her to lay with him again because of what she said.<sup>54</sup> Ásgerður responded rather plainly to this threat with one of her own,

You think what you will but I am not going to argue with you about whether I may sleep in this bed or not. You have a choice—either you take me in and act as if nothing has happened or I will call witnesses this minute, divorce you and have my father reclaim my bride-price and my dowry. Then you wouldn't have to worry about my taking up room in your bed ever again.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "Gísli Súrsson's Saga," in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 500-557.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 509-510.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

Threatening divorce was one of the more reliable ways that a woman could get her way.

Divorce itself does not appear to be a humiliating act. For women, divorce often protected their honor and the honor of their families. Men did not seem to suffer dishonor from divorce, as divorce was a natural end to an unhappy marriage, although the loss of wealth and alliances could be problematic. However, the reasons behind the divorce could cause humiliation. In the case of Ásgerðr and Þorkell, Ásgerðr was upset that Þorkell denied her a place in their bed. She threatened to divorce him, although legally she had no grounds to do so at this point. Grágás stated that a woman may divorce her husband if he did not sleep in the same bed with her for six seasons.<sup>56</sup> This law ensured that the couple would bear children and that someone would inherit the property. *Grágás* cannot be taken at face value, though, since the law code declares that divorce did not exist in Iceland, but then goes on to describe the different scenarios where divorce was permitted.<sup>57</sup> This is not the only moment where *Grágás* appears to be an unreliable law code, and for this reason Grágás may not have been the final word on legal matters.<sup>58</sup>

Although Ásgerðr's threat appeared to be empty because of the lack of legal backing to it, the threat clearly had some weight, as immediately after Ásgerðr issued the threat Þorkell allowed her back into their bed and they continued as if the situation had never happened. *Grágás* established that if a man did not lie with his wife for a prolonged period, she had a right to divorce him. Perhaps Ásgerðr had this law in mind when she threatened divorce, believing that this situation could go on for such a period that divorce would eventually become an

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<sup>56</sup> *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, trans. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 77.

<sup>57</sup> Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 55.

<sup>58</sup> Grágás states that if violence was the reason for divorce, the violence had to result in lesions to the brain, the body cavity, or the bone marrow. The sagas, in comparison, show that slapping justified divorce.

option. In this case, the threat was a warning of what could happen. On the other hand, perhaps *Grágás* in this case was not followed exactly and that denying a wife access to the marriage bed once was grounds for divorce. Regardless, Icelanders viewed the act of denying a wife the bed and not procreating as wrong. Norse weddings focused heavily on the ideas of sex and reproduction, and the purpose of marriage was to reproduce in a controlled manner.<sup>59</sup> Ásgerðr felt wronged by Þorkell because not only did he deny her a place in their bed, he denied her the chance to have children, which was the purpose of the union. This act, or lack thereof, appears to be shameful, because when Ásgerðr threatened her husband with divorce unless she be allowed to lie next to him, he immediately let her into the bed and the saga implies that the two made love.<sup>60</sup> Þorkell, afraid of acquiring shame, dropped the argument entirely.

In the sagas, no women followed through with divorce if they had threatened it. In every instance, the man righted whatever wrong he had committed against her.<sup>61</sup> This stands in contrast to the women who divorced without prior threats. These women who ended their marriages did not stand to gain anything from allowing the marriage to continue. They saw divorce as beneficial. On the other hand, women who only threatened divorce did so because only a slight change was needed in order to improve their situation. They realized the benefit of the marriage they were in and thought they would be better off if they continued the union. This did not mean that they let their displeasure go unknown. Threatening divorce was an

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<sup>59</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> "Gisli Sursson's Saga," 511.

<sup>61</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 58.

effective way to convince their husbands to change their behavior or to act, which will be seen in the following sections.

### **Jealousy and Self-Interest**

Not all instances of a woman using the honor code were to right a wrong against her. There are several instances where women acted entirely out of self-interest. Jealousy was one of the reasons for this, which is demonstrated in *Laxdæla Saga*. The Saga of the Greenlanders presents an example of a woman using the honor code in order to increase her own prestige, though in an extreme fashion. Lastly, not all instances of self-interest were selfish. The Saga of the Sworn Brothers includes a woman who uses the code to protect the community. While the morality of the next three instances vary, all feature women acting out of self-interest in some way.

One of the major plots of *Laxdæla Saga*, or the *Saga of the People of Laxárdalr*, is the tale of Guðrún and her four marriages. Guðrún's jealousy and desire for revenge leads her to use the honor code to turn situations in her favor. The saga records that Guðrún was the most beautiful woman of her time, and a young man named Kjartan was the only one who was a worthy match. Naturally, the two courted a bit until Kjartan decided to go abroad. Guðrún asked to go abroad with him, which Kjartan refused to allow. Kjartan asked her to wait for him to return, but Guðrún, bitter about his refusal, turned him down. They parted with ill feelings.<sup>62</sup>

Kjartan's foster-brother Bolli accompanied him abroad, but eventually returned home. Kjartan remained abroad. Once Bolli was back in Iceland, he asked Guðrún for her hand in

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<sup>62</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 142.



marriage. She reluctantly agreed, only after Bolli told her that Kjartan had become friendly with the Norwegian king's sister.<sup>63</sup> Eventually, Kjartan returned home expecting to marry Guðrún, only to find her married. Instead, Kjartan, showing no emotion upon hearing about Guðrún's marriage, married Hrefna, which made Guðrún jealous and angry.<sup>64</sup> The rest of the saga tells of Guðrún's attempts to get revenge.

Guðrún exacted her revenge through manipulating the honor code in different ways. As can only be expected, she decided that the best way to get back at Kjartan was to have him killed. What started off as petty fighting came to a boiling point when Bolli and Guðrún made a deal to buy land from a man. After the transaction was finished, Kjartan went to the man and convinced him to sell the land to him, as there were not enough witnesses the first time to make the agreement a legal transaction. When Guðrún found out about Kjartan's actions, she immediately tried to incite Bolli into action, saying,

It seems to me, Bolli, that Kjartan has given you a harsher choice than he offered Thorarin: either that you leave this district with little honour, or else that you confront him and prove yourself rather less faint-hearted than you have been hitherto.<sup>65</sup>

Bolli did not respond to this goading, as his loyalties to his foster-brother remained strong.

However, Guðrún did not give up easily.

In Guðrún's second attempt to have Kjartan killed, she was successful because she employed multiple tactics to manipulate the honor code in her goading. In addition, she incited not only her husband but her brothers, the Osvífssons, as well. She did this by insulting the masculinity and honor of the men and then threatening to divorce Bolli. One morning, Guðrún

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<sup>63</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 153.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-158.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

woke all the men early and asked them what they were going to do that day. Her brother Ospak responded that they would be having a quiet day—“for there isn’t much work to be done just now.” Guðrún immediately shamed them, saying,

You would have had just the right temper if you had been peasants’ daughters—you do nothing about anything, whether good or bad. Despite all the disgrace and dishonor that Kjartan has done you, you lose no sleep over it even when he rides past your door with only a single companion. Men like you have the memory of hogs. It’s obviously futile to hope that you will even dare to attack Kjartan at home if you haven’t the nerve to face him now when he is travelling with only one or two companions. You just sit at home pretending to be men, and there are always too many of you about.<sup>66</sup>

While this shaming stirred the Osvifssons into action, Bolli still remained apprehensive about attacking his foster-brother. Guðrún told him that not everyone can be pleased and that if he did not attack Kjartan, she would divorce him. This is the second instance of using the honor code in her favor.

As previously stated, divorce itself was not shameful; however, the reasons for the divorce could be. In regards to Guðrún’s threat of divorce, this was certainly the case. In this example, Guðrún insulted the men’s masculinity by comparing them to the daughters of farmers, implying that they are lazy, pampered, and weak. At the end, Guðrún added that there were always “too many of you about,” a comment normally directed at women who would sit about and do nothing. If Guðrún divorced Bolli, his lack of masculinity would almost certainly be the reason behind the divorce, something that would become well-known. Not only had Guðrún insulted Bolli’s masculinity, she threatened to make this dishonor public. Bolli, insulted by both Kjartan’s and Guðrún’s humiliation of him, decided to kill Kjartan.

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<sup>66</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 172.

By convincing Bolli to kill Kjartan, Guðrún not only gained revenge on Kjartan, but also established herself as the dominant force in the marriage. The comment made to Bolli upon his return suggested that Guðrún was aware of this power dynamic between the two of them: “Morning tasks are often mixed: I have spun yarn for twelve ells of cloth and you have killed Kjartan.”<sup>67</sup> Even though Bolli answered her insults by killing Kjartan, Guðrún still belittled him. The irony of her statement compared Bolli’s act of killing his foster-brother to the domestic chore of spinning yarn, a task only women performed. An important note about the killing is that it took five men to kill Kjartan, who stood alone during the fight. This potentially was not a feat that any of the five men should be proud of, as this was an embarrassment that detracted from their masculinity.

Guðrún was not finished establishing her dominance, though. When Guðrún told him that what she liked most about the day was that Kjartan’s widow would not laugh tonight, Bolli became angry. Guðrún responded, “I am deeply grateful to you for what you have done. I now know for certain that you will do anything for me.”<sup>68</sup> Again, Guðrún established her dominance over her husband, as she knew that if she could convince him to kill his foster-brother, she could convince him to do anything else she wanted.

Guðrún was not the only woman in the sagas to use the honor code to manipulate events in her favor. Freydís Eiríksdóttir used the honor code in an attempt to gain glory for herself. She was depicted in two sagas, *Grænlendinga saga*, or the Saga of the Greenlanders, and *Eiríks saga rauða*, or the Saga of Eirík the Red. These sagas describe Freydís as a

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<sup>67</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 176.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

domineering and greedy woman, mentioning that she was dominant in her marriage and that her husband was selected for his money.<sup>69</sup>

Freydís came from a family of renowned men that included her father Eirík the Red and her brother Leif Eiríkson. Freydís, too, wished for fame and fortune, and proposed a voyage to Vinland with brothers Helgi and Finnbogi with the agreement that all profits were to be split evenly. However, Freydís did not want to share the wealth with the brothers; as mentioned earlier, she was a greedy woman and came from a family and a society where prestige was garnered by accomplishment. However, voyages often needed a contract between several partners who agreed to work together, as they were costly and dangerous.<sup>70</sup> This did not stop her from complicating the voyage. Immediately, Freydís began to create problems with the brothers, first lying about how many men she brought on the voyage (they agreed on thirty, but Freydís brought thirty-five), as well as forcing the brothers to leave her houses and build their own for the winter.<sup>71</sup>

The sagas do not explain why Freydís hated the brothers so much. Her animosity can only be explained by the fact that she wanted all the profits of the voyage for herself, but because the brothers had helped with the voyage, this was not an option. In a strange twist, the tension seemed to be dissolved early one morning when Freydís met with Finnbogi outside. Finnbogi expressed his dislike for the ill feelings between them. Freydís agreed to put the past behind them. She then asked Finnbogi if she could trade ships with him so that she could return

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<sup>69</sup> It is unknown if Freydís chose her husband herself or if her father did so for her. Either way, the Saga of the Greenlanders mentions that Thorvard was selected for his money, and that he was “of no consequence” in comparison to Freydís.

<sup>70</sup> “The Saga of the Greenlanders,” (see note 48), 648.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 648.

home to Greenland.<sup>72</sup> He agreed, and Freydís returned to her husband Thorvard, who asked Freydís why she was cold and wet. Freydís replied that Helgi and Finnbogi had beat her and that Thorvard was “such a coward that [he] will repay neither dishonor done to me nor to [himself].” She continued to say that if he did not avenge her, she would divorce him. Thorvard, unable to ignore her threats of dishonor, immediately ordered their men to kill the brothers and the brothers’ men. When only the women remain, Freydís’s men refused to kill them. Freydís, knowing she would be punished if any word of her atrocious deed reached Greenland, killed the women herself. She returned to Greenland, telling everyone that Helgi and Finnbogi had chosen to remain in Vinland.<sup>73</sup>

Parallels can be drawn between the stories of Freydís and Guðrún. These two women were headstrong and willing to do whatever was necessary to get their way. They employed a similar technique in order to goad the men around them into doing what they wanted. Like Guðrún, Freydís threatened to divorce her husband. Again, while divorce itself was not shameful, Freydís stated that she would be divorcing him because he did not avenge the dishonor done to him and his wife. The reason for divorce would then be cowardice, perhaps the worst quality for an Icelander to have.

Unlike Guðrún though, Freydís warned her husband of the shame that would fall upon him if he did not avenge her and by association himself. Men often attacked the women of other men in order to dishonor them. In these situations of violence against a non-kinswoman, the male relatives were always the victims of the act, with women’s feelings either secondary

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<sup>72</sup> “The Saga of the Greenlanders,” 649.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 648-650.

or inconsequential.<sup>74</sup> The inability to protect one's family was shameful. Freydís's claim that the brothers had dishonored her husband Thorvard by beating her, while untrue, was believable. If Helgi and Finnbogi attacked Freydís, the implication was that they attacked Thorvald and his honor. If Thorvald refused to avenge his wife, shame would have fallen on him. Thorvard's contemporaries already viewed him as weak, an embarrassing trait for a man during this time, and Thorvard could not afford any damage to his reputation. Freydís, a conniving woman, was aware of the social rules of medieval Iceland and used this honor code system to manipulate Thorvard into thinking the brothers had insulted him by beating his wife. At this point, Thorvard had no choice but to kill Helgi and Finnbogi, as the alternative of humiliation to him was far worse.

Freydís was an extreme women in comparison to the other women in the sagas, and while this can pose challenges for historians, she should not be ignored. While Freydís shared some qualities of personality with Guðrún, she largely stands apart from the rest of the women in the sagas, resulting in scholars such as Jenny Jochens and Helga Kress disregarding her entirely.<sup>75</sup> She is remembered for the ways that she did not fit the mold for a woman of the time. After all, she killed five women in the camp in cold blood when the men refused to do so. In the *Saga of Eirík the Red*, Freydís picked up weapons once more to defend her camp from the *skrælingjar*.<sup>76</sup> The sight of her shouting with a sword was enough to frighten the *skrælingjar* away.<sup>77</sup> Whether or not Norse women participated in battle, which may forever be disputed,

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<sup>74</sup> Ljungqvist, "Rape in the Icelandic Sagas," 433-434.

<sup>75</sup> Kirsten Wolf, "Amazons in Vinland," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 94, no. 4 (1996): 478.

<sup>76</sup> The *Skrælingjar* were the natives encountered in Vinland (the area around Newfoundland). Some scholars believe the term referred to the Thule people, but this is uncertain. The etymology of the word is debated. For more on the Norse in Vinland, see Wallace, "The Norse in Newfoundland," 5-43.

<sup>77</sup> "Eirík the Red's Saga," (see note 48), 671.

taking up arms in the sagas of the Icelanders was uncommon. The actions of Freydís, along with leading her own men to Vinland, were typically the actions of men in the sagas. For this reason, she stands alone, as no other woman in the sagas ever challenged gender as strongly as she did.

However, Freydís was still bound by her gender. She did not have control over the men she had brought to Vinland in the same way that a man would have. Her crew followed not out of respect for her but out of a wish for prestige, which was garnered through action. Thorvard, not Freydís, told the crew to kill Helgi and Finnbogi.<sup>78</sup> The crew was more willing to follow Thorvard, a man considered to be weak, rather than Freydís. Had Freydís simply demanded that the brothers be killed, the crew would not have obeyed her for two reasons: one, they would have known there would be repercussions for the unjustified killings, since an unreported killing constituted as murder and resulted in full outlawry; two, while Freydís may have been the member of an impressive and renowned family, as a woman she had no power to improve the men's social standing herself.<sup>79</sup> The men would have nothing to gain but much to lose if they followed Freydís. The lack of control Freydís had is seen again when the crew refused to kill the women, despite Freydís wanting everyone dead. Instead she had to kill the women herself, an easy task as the women were without defense.<sup>80</sup> To kill the brothers and their men, Freydís had to convince her husband to command the crew to kill the brothers, which, as explained above, she did through manipulation of the honor code.

Not all instances of exploitation of the honor system were entirely to benefit the woman herself. Sometimes, women would use the honor code to redirect male ambition so that these

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<sup>78</sup> "The Saga of the Greenlanders," 650.

<sup>79</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 249.

<sup>80</sup> "The Saga of the Greenlanders," 650.

men would help fellow Icelanders. While masculinity was attainable it could also be lost. Men had to constantly prove their manliness to others.<sup>81</sup> In *Fóstbræðra saga*, or the *Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, Sigrfljóð, a clever and well-liked widow, used this concern for maintaining masculinity and honor to convince two sworn brothers to aid the community. She let the sworn brothers Þormóð and Þorgeir seek shelter in her home during a storm.<sup>82</sup> When the storm passed, the sworn brothers decided that they wanted to sail north and go whaling. Sigrfljóð believed this to be a waste of time and that there were better, more productive things for the brothers to do. She then said to them, “More honorable and manly it seems to me to kill the evildoers who plunder folks here than to go for whales... Many would be avenged if you slew them, and many would reward you nobly for it.” This peaked the brothers’ interest, as well as concerned them, as they were not sure if this was wise council. Sigrfljóð continued, “Now is borne out the saying ‘bad men are better heard of than seen.’ You consider yourselves great heroes when cowing cottagers, but you quail when put up to a real test of manhood.” The sworn brothers then killed the men causing trouble in the area.<sup>83</sup>

Sigrfljóð attacked the sworn brothers’ masculinity in this use of the honor code, and the threat of losing their masculinity in the eyes of their fellow Icelanders was enough to push the brothers into action. Manhood was an achievement rather than an acquisition that came with age.<sup>84</sup> Despite being adults, the brothers were not necessarily men. They had to prove their masculinity to fellow Icelanders, which was done through performing laborious tasks and

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<sup>81</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, “Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls Saga*,” *Viator* 38, no. 1 (2007): 210.

<sup>82</sup> *The Sagas of Kormák and the Sworn Brothers*, translated by Lee M. Hollander (New York: Princeton University Press, 1949), 95.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>84</sup> Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 372.



defending their honor. By saying the brothers could not withstand a test of manhood, Sigrfljóð issued a challenge to the brothers: either they did what she wanted them to do or others would hear that the brothers were not masculine. The brothers realized Sigrfljóð was manipulating the honor code, as they questioned whether or not this was wise council. However, the threat of losing their masculinity proved to be enough to push the brothers into action. Not wanting others to view them as *blauðr*, the brothers killed the miscreants in the area at Sigrfljóð's urging. Sigrfljóð, in the end, was able to eliminate trouble in the area and can be remembered as yet another woman who used the honor code to successfully push her own interests.

### **Avenging the Death of Husbands and Kin**

The most memorable occurrences of women using the honor code transpire during the avenging of deaths. As mentioned earlier, widowhood was not an uncommon occurrence. Due to the brutal nature of Icelandic feuding, men died young often. The frequency of this is unclear, but the sagas give enough examples to suggest that an early death was not a rare occurrence. As a result, scenes with women goading men into avenging their fallen husbands and kinsmen are plentiful. Women could not advocate in court, but they did do extralegal advocacy through shaming, inciting, and goading. Because settling the dispute in a legal setting was not an option for women, they often sought compensation through death.<sup>85</sup> Women played an important role in selecting the avenger and beginning the feud. Often women turned to the strongest male figure in the family to fulfill this role, although sometimes they selected multiple men, especially when they asked their sons to avenge.

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<sup>85</sup> Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 196-197.

Unlike the previous situations, to avenge a death women used not only words but objects as well to punctuate their message. This is a popular device of goading in the sagas. In this example from *Heiðarvíga saga*, or *the Saga of the Slayings on the Heath*, Þuríður used a meal to add force behind her goading. Þuríður wanted to avenge the slaying of her son, Hall. In order to do this, she convinced her other sons to take action by serving them large portions of meat. The sons found this odd, as their mother was never one to eagerly serve such an excess of food. Þuríður responded, “There’s nothing strange about it, and you needn’t be surprised, as your brother Hall was carved up into larger pieces without me hearing you mention that it was anything strange.”<sup>86</sup> Þuríður then placed a stone in front of each of them, which further confused the sons. Þuríður continued,

What you have been swallowing, brothers, has done you no more good than these stones, since you haven’t dared to avenge your brother Hall, such a man as he was. You are far from the like of your kinsmen, who were worthy men, who would never have put up with such shame and disgrace as you have lived under for a long time now, and many people have condemned you for.<sup>87</sup>

In goading her sons to avenge their brother, Þuríður compared them to their kinsmen and said that her sons brought shame to the legacy of the family. This connects to Sigrfljóð’s criticism of the sworn brothers’ masculinity. Þuríður alluded to the masculinity of the brothers, or the lack thereof. Þuríður placed their kinsmen on a pedestal as shining examples of masculinity but told her sons that they fell short of their kinsmen. Not only did Þuríður challenge their masculinity, she painted them as disappointments to their family. Men had to defend their own honor, as well as prove themselves worthy of being a descendent of impressive ancestors.<sup>88</sup> This goading

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<sup>86</sup> “The Saga of the Slayings on the Heath,” in *The Complete Saga of Icelanders Volume 4*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leif Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 104.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>88</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 29.

made the sons feel obligated to avenge their brother so that they would not tarnish their family's name by being examples of weak men.

Calling a man a disappointment to his heroic ancestors seems to be a common way to goad a man into avenging a death, as Þuríður's goading is not the only instance of this. In *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún had her husband kill Kjartan. Naturally, this killing was not ignored and Kjartan's death set off a chain of revenge killings. Kjartan's father accepted the wergild for the killing, which ideally should have ended any possibility of a feud.<sup>89</sup> Kjartan's mother, Þorgerð, did not believe this to be enough. She sought revenge for his death and demanded that Bolli, Kjartan's killer and foster-brother, pay with his life, but she needed men to carry out the killing. She turned to her sons for this task. Þorgerð rode to the edge of Bolli's farm with her sons and asked them who lived at that farm, to which they replied that she knew very well who lived there. Þorgerð snorted and said,

Yes, I certainly know! I know that Bolli lives here, your brother's killer. And you are remarkably unlike your noble kinsmen if you don't want to avenge such a brother as Kjartan was. Your grandfather, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, would never have behaved like this. It is cruel to have such craven sons; and I for one believe it would have suited you better to have been your father's daughters and been married off.<sup>90</sup>

This is not the end of her speech, but these words capture enough of the attack on the sons' honor. Þorgerð used several tactics that have been discussed already. First, like Þuríður, Þorgerð compared her sons to their great ancestors. Þorgerð named one in particular: Egill Skalla-Grímsson. The naming of Egill held significance; Egill was a famous poet and warrior, whose tale is told in *Egil's Saga*. The sons would have had a hard enough time living up to the

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<sup>89</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 179.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-183.

legacy of Egill. Because Egill was their grandfather, there most likely were frequent comparisons to him. Þorgerð told her sons that they brought shame both to the family and to themselves by not avenging their brother's death.

In addition to suggesting that the sons were a disappointment to Egill's name, Þorgerð impugned their masculinity, a tactic utilized by Sigrfljóð, Þuríður, and Guðrún as well. Not only were they disappointments, according to Þorgerð, they were feminine as well. Þorgerð compared their behavior to women, saying they behaved more like daughters than sons. Women did not avenge deaths with violence, and Þorgerð drew a parallel between the inaction expected of women and the inaction of her sons. Inaction was shameful in this case because of the association with women and effeminacy. This humiliating speech worked, and the sons set off to avenge their brother's death.

Words were not the only way that women goaded men into action; the sagas show the use of bloody tokens as tools for persuading men to avenge a death. Much like Þuríður using meat and stones to enforce a point, some women used belongings of the deceased to add emotional strength to their goading. These belongings had a connection not only to the deceased but to the death itself, often having blood on them. They appeared in seven different instances in the sagas and were used in instances where goading alone has failed. Bloody tokens could be extreme, particularly in *Eyrbyggja Saga* when Þorgerð exhumed her dead husband's head as a way to convince her kinsmen to avenge his death.<sup>91</sup> However, these items do seem to be rooted in history. This ritual of vengeance is cross-cultural and exists in both

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<sup>91</sup> *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 52.

literary and non-literary sources, indicating that the practice was not unique to Iceland.<sup>92</sup> One such instance appears in *Njal's Saga*, such as in the case of Hildigunn, who used her husband's bloody cloak to incite her uncle.

Goadings alone did not always convince men to avenge the dead. Hildigunn suffered the loss of her husband, Höskuldr, when men acting on behalf of a jealous chieftain killed Höskuldr while he was working in his field. Hildigunn took Höskuldr's cloak, wiped up the blood with it, and stored the cloak in a chest.<sup>93</sup> Hildigunn was without sons who could prosecute the case, so she turned to Flosi, her uncle and guardian, to avenge her husband. Flosi, on his way to the Althing to support legal action for Höskuldr's death, stopped to visit his niece. Hildigunn behaved in a hyper-formal manner, unsettling Flosi, before weeping before him. Flosi promised her that he would prosecute the case until she received full compensation. Flosi was Hildigunn's uncle, as well as her *fastnandi*, the man who gave her in marriage. Because of this role, Flosi had an obligation to support Hildigunn's family. However, the sources are unclear about the extent of the obligations of a *fastnandi* and whether avenging was a task that fell to him.<sup>94</sup> While he was willing to plead the case, he had no intention of avenging Höskuldr.

Hildigunn turned to the honor code to convince Flosi to avenge her husband, as compensation was not enough for her. She began to argue with Flosi, first saying Höskuldr would have sought "bloody vengeance" if Flosi was in his place. By saying this, Hildigunn hoped to make Flosi feel obligated to avenge the death. Hildigunn then goes on to say that Flosi's brothers slew a man in revenge for much less than death. Once again, the comparison between

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<sup>92</sup> Miller, "Choosing the Avenger," 182.

<sup>93</sup> *Njal's Saga*, 229.

<sup>94</sup> Miller, "Choosing the Avenger," 182.

the goaded and his family arises. Hildigunn suggested that Flosi's brothers were more masculine than he was because they avenged a wrong done against their father with death, while Flosi would not avenge a death with death. Hildigunn expected Flosi to feel obligated to prove himself better than his brothers, but the insult failed. Flosi recognized that Hildigunn wanted him to avenge Höskuldr's death and refused.<sup>95</sup>

When goading alone failed, the addition of a bloody token to the act of inciting was an effective method. After this unsuccessful goading, Hildigunn produced the bloody token, the cloak Höskuldr was murdered in, and tried to incite Flosi again. Bloody tokens more than represented the deceased; these tokens were the deceased speaking. When Hildigunn threw Höskuldr's bloody cloak on Flosi, she spoke, "I call God and all good men to witness that I adjure you by all the wonders of your Christ and by your manhood and valor that you avenge all the wounds which Höskuldr received on his body, or else be called a caitiff wretch [nithing] before all men!"<sup>96</sup> This speech was not a call for Flosi to avenge Höskuldr for Hildigunn's sake, rather Höskuldr's corpse demanding that he be avenged. With the inclusion of bloody tokens, the corpse, not that woman, wanted someone to avenge them. Corpses in Iceland held an active legal role. They could be prosecuted and even declared a killer when the corpse had not done the killing.<sup>97</sup> In this situation the corpse is transferring the responsibility of avenging to Flosi, though Hildigunn, not the corpse, was the one actually asking for vengeance. Most likely, the avenger would have been confused by this persona adopted by the goader.<sup>98</sup> However, the

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<sup>95</sup> *Njáls Saga*, 235.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>97</sup> Miller, "Choosing the Avenger," 189.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

avenger knew that he could either avenge the death or suffer shame. After Hildigunn's goading, Flosi became angry and accused Hildigunn of inciting actions that would lead to the deaths of everyone involved. Yet, after he left he began gathering men to avenge Höskuldr's death.

This instance of goading is a little different than the previous examples, as this one does not use insults, but rather issues a warning. Hildigunn did not tell Flosi he was not masculine for not avenging her husband. Instead, Hildigunn told him that he would be *hvers manns niðingr* if he did not act.<sup>99</sup> A nithing was someone of the lowest status. He was a betrayer of friends, a truce-breaker, a murderer, and much more.<sup>100</sup> In order for Hildigunn's goading to work, she had to convince Flosi that if he did not avenge her husband he would suffer the most severe shame, which would lead to social ostracism. Since Flosi had no kinship ties to Höskuldr, most likely no one would have shamed him for only seeking legal recourse, as it was not expected for him to avenge Höskuldr's death.<sup>101</sup> What was important was that Hildigunn was able to convince Flosi he would be a nithing if he did not act. She was childless and had no one else to act on her behalf, hence her turning to Flosi, her *fastnandi*. Because Hildigunn convinced Flosi he would be a nithing otherwise, Flosi avenged Höskuldr's death. As a consequence of avenging, the *goðar* of the Althing sentenced Flosi to three years of outlawry.<sup>102</sup> To Flosi, the shame and ostracism Hildigunn threatened was worse than the risk of outlawry. If a man was an outlaw, anyone could kill him without consequence, which was a dangerous situation since the victim's family typically wanted revenge. This shows how effective goading was and what lengths men were

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<sup>99</sup> "Called a nithing by all men."

<sup>100</sup> Miller, "Choosing the Avenger," 186.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>102</sup> *Njáls Saga*, 328.

willing to go to in order to prevent shame from falling upon them. It also demonstrates how much control women could wield by using the honor code to their advantage.

## Conclusion

While women used different tactics in their goading, every form of this shaming ritual allowed women to participate in a decision-making process typically left to men. Women ensured that men continued to follow the honor code by shaming them. Men had no choice but to uphold the honor code, and women made sure that they did not forget their obligations to their honor. Women who incited and goaded kept the honor code alive. They depended on men's concern for their honor; without this concern, women were not able to influence how events unfolded. Some scholars, such as Jenny Jochens, have argued that this act of shaming has no place in history.<sup>103</sup> Jochens argues that women in the sagas were scapegoats, someone for men to blame when their actions had unfortunate consequences.

What Jochens failed to note was the abundance of non-women inciters, and the sagas suggest that being a goader was less dependent on sex than on status. The sagas give examples of all sorts of people inciting, not only women. The one element that all these situations have in common is that it is a lower member of society who goads someone of a higher social status. In the case of this paper, women, considered the socially inferior gender, are goading men who are typically more respected. There are other relationship dynamics in which goading appears, such as the servant and the master, and the old man and his sons.<sup>104</sup> The situations appear to

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<sup>103</sup> Jochens, *Old Norse Images*, 203.

<sup>104</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 212.



have more to do with the disenfranchised trying to assert control, rather than, as Jochens suggests, an anti-feminist way of scapegoating.

The idea that women exerted power over some aspects of their life does not mean that these women disrupted the patriarchal system of Iceland. Women did not have power in a formal sense; there is no legitimacy to their influencing of events. All of the aforementioned instances show women using their personal relationships to influence the decision-making process. As long as women's 'power' did not disrupt the idea of male dominance, women could exert their own forms of control.<sup>105</sup> In the case of medieval Iceland, women could shame men until they acted in the way they desired.

The sagas show that women goaded in order to better their position and influence situations. While historians may forever debate the historical accuracy of the events, the sagas document the social interactions and expectations of medieval Iceland. They abide by the limitations of Iceland, so if a women acted outside of expectation, the saga would make note of it. The specific situations discussed in this paper may not have occurred exactly as the sagas portrayed, but this does not discredit the historicity of these shaming acts. These acts are common and found throughout the sagas, with the sagas never mentioning that these acts were outside of the norm. These acts did not take power away from men, either, but instead let men keep their power while also giving women more control. Men responded to women's goading by acting in a way that ensured the preservation of their honor and status. Through the

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<sup>105</sup> Susan Carol Rogers, "Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance: A Model of Female/Male Interaction in Peasant Society," *American Ethnologist* 2, no. 4 (Nov 1975), 730.

threat of shame and the utilization of the strict honor code to her advantage, a woman could gain control of the male-dominated decision-making process that impacted her so heavily.

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